



LEWIS & CLARK CITY-COUNTY Health Department

1930 Ninth Avenue
Helena, MT 59601
PH: 406.4HEALTH or 406.443.2584
Fax: 406.457.8990

Public Health Column for IR

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Contact: Melanie Reynolds, Health Officer, 457-8910

Gayle Shirley, Communications Coordinator, 457-8908

Winter a Wonderland If Enjoyed Safely

The folks who wrote the song “Winter Wonderland” must have been thinking of Montana.

Far from being put off by the snow and cold, many of us can’t wait to tumble outside to ski, snowboard, sled, and otherwise romp in the snow. These are great ways to inject much-needed physical activity into our lives and give our health a winter pick-me-up.

Even those of us who prefer curling up with cocoa and a good book will have to venture outside sometime – to shovel snow, maneuver icy sidewalks, or drive treacherous roads.

Whatever draws or drags us outside, we’ll appreciate our winter wonderland more if we take a few seasonal precautions to protect our health and safety.

Hypothermia, Frostbite

This month, the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) released a report highlighting the primary causes of severe injury and death that occur in our state between November and March. According to this report, hypothermia is the number one cause of winter-related deaths, accounting for 37 percent of them.

Hypothermia, or abnormally low body temperature, occurs when you lose body heat faster than you produce it. Eventually, this uses up your stored energy, making it harder to think clearly or move well. This makes hypothermia particularly dangerous; you may not realize what’s happening or be able to do anything about it.

Hypothermia usually occurs in very cold temperatures, but it can happen when temperatures are above 40° Fahrenheit if it’s windy or if you’re wet.

Frostbite is another winter health hazard. It involves the actual freezing of a body part, like fingers, toes, nose, ears, cheeks, or chin. It can permanently damage body tissues and in severe cases require amputation.

To prevent hypothermia and frostbite:

- Don’t stay outside for too long in extreme weather. Persistent shivering is a sign you need to go in.

- Dress appropriately. Layer clothing and wear a hat, gloves, water-resistant boots, and good socks. Inner clothing layers made of wool, silk, and polypropylene hold more body heat than cotton.
- Get out of wet clothing as soon as possible.
- Learn the warning signs and treatment for hypothermia at www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/winter/staysafe/hypothermia.asp
- Learn more about frostbite at www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/winter/staysafe/frostbite.asp

Slips and Falls

Sixty-three percent of severe winter injuries are due to falls, according to the DPHHS report. Of these, 40 percent are related to skiing and snowboarding. Bone fractures are the most common injury.

But you don't have to engage in daring feats of skill and speed to become the victim of a winter fall. Sometimes just stepping out to get the mail is enough to get you.

One Helena resident has a dramatic way of reminding passers-by about the dangers of ice. After falling a couple of years ago and shattering her wrist, she began hanging her old arm cast from her backyard fence each winter. On it, for everyone walking or driving by to see, is penned in big, black letters "Think Ice."

Here are some thoughts to keep in mind when "thinking ice" this winter:

- Clear snow and ice from driveways, porches, and walkways to help prevent falls.
- Beware of "black" ice. Even if a surface appears clear, it may be covered in an extra-thin and extra-slippery layer of ice.
- Wear sturdy shoes or boots with low heels and textured, nonslip soles for good traction.
- Consider using traction devices you can attach to the bottoms of shoes or boots. (But remember, they may increase your chances of slipping on wet floors. Be sure to remove them when you come inside.)
- Modify your gait. Shorten your stride and move slowly. Keep your knees slightly bent, your feet widely spaced, and your toes turned outward.
- If you feel yourself falling backward, tuck your chin to protect your head as much as possible. Try to land on a well-padded part of your body.

Winter Sports

Although winter sports are a great way to stay healthy, there are risks to pushing yourself to the limits of your speed, strength, and endurance.

Concussion, a type of traumatic brain injury, is a particular concern. According to the DPHHS report, only 22 percent of Montanans who were severely injured when skiing, snowboarding, or sledding reported that they were wearing a helmet at the time.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have teamed up with national hockey, skiing, and snowboarding associations to urge winter sports enthusiasts to wear a helmet. Because every concussion is potentially serious, victims should report the injury to a health-care provider.

Parents and coaches of winter sports can learn more at www.cdc.gov/concussion/response.html

For a comprehensive guide to winter health and safety, visit the CDC website:
www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/winter/guide.asp

*The Lewis & Clark City-County Health Department's mission is to improve and protect
the health of all Lewis and Clark County residents.*